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ABSTRACT

This study hypothesized that an intervention program that would develop students' language facility in lower elementary school might increase the students' likelihood of retention. An outgrowth of a family literacy project which focused on raising the literacy level of an Appalachian community, the study used the Language Experience Approach which included pre-assessment and post-assessment of students' knowledge of sight words and awareness of story sequence. This approach features integration of the language arts by having children dictate sentences based on their experiences and then read the sentences back. The treatment was used with low reading groups in a rural community in Tennessee. Of the 24 children identified each year, one control group and two experimental groups with eight children in each were established. During the first phase, the grade levels were kindergarten and first grade, during the second phase they were grades 1 and 2. Lessons consisted of introductory experiences, discussions, chart writing from student dictation, chart reading, and follow-up activities. The children participated in two major projects each year: the science fair and bookmaking. Results showed no significant differences between control and experimental groups for either word recognition or knowledge of sequence at both kindergarten and first-grade levels. During the yearlong study, first grade tests results showed that the experimental groups performed significantly better than the control group on both word recognition and sequence tests. Second-grade test results indicated that the experimental groups performed significantly better than the control group on sequence tests but not on word recognition tests. Observation results found that children improved in their ability to dictate complete sentences and in their use of language. The children seemed to progress faster with sequencing than with word recognition. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (MG)

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FAMILY LITERACY PROJECT IN THE UPPER CUMBERLAND REGION OF TENNESSEE

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FAMILY LITERACY PROJECT

IN THE UPPER CUMBERLAND REGION OF TENNESSEE

The Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee is characterized by poverty, undereducated adults, high teenage pregnancy rates, and high school dropout rates. The problems of the region are representative of those of Southern Appalachia and of many other rural areas across the nation.

The Family Literacy Project is addressing these problems in the Monterey, Tennessee, community by a variety of activities having an overall goal of raising the literacy level of the community. Specific objectives include: 1) improved language skills among elementary students; 2) increased parental involvement in the schools; 3) reduction of the teenage pregnancy rate; and 4) reduction of the dropout rate. Program strategies are listed below.

1. Language enrichment for lower elementary students.
2. Prime time reading for upper elementary students.
3. "Class of 2000" emphasis in K-12.
4. Faculty awareness of student problems.
5. Parent visitation in the school.
6. Graduate cohort on cooperative and mastery learning.
7. Expanded number of student teachers.
8. Workshops for science and mathematics teachers.

The schools have created a Family Literacy Steering Committee consisting of the two principals, two teachers from each school, and two faculty from Tennessee Technological University. The

teachers involved in the cohort implemented the research on effective teaching, cooperative learning, and mastery learning throughout the curriculum. Cooperative learning curriculum materials have been purchased for reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 6. The elementary school initiated parent visitation for first grade parents and prime time reading for fourth grade students. In the fall of 1989, the fall carnival parde was a cooperative effort of the two schools and featured a "Stay in School--Class of 2000" theme.

The faculty were revitalized and empowered with new skills gained through the cohort experience. The funds from GTE have enabled the purchase of small items for which no other funds were available but which have been critical to program success. These include t-shirts for prime time reading, learning style inventories on all children in selected grades, cooperative learning materials, and other instructional materials.

Since the Family Literacy Program is integrated throughout both elementary and secondary schools, all students should be touched in some way. The program does not meet all needs of this at-risk population but is a significant beginning toward a long-term goal of raising the educational level of the community.

The remainder of this paper will focus on the strategy of language enrichment for lower elementary students, which focused on the language experience approach to reading. A research background and a description of the study follow.

Research Related to the Language Experience Approach

The language experience approach (LEA) to teaching reading has had the support of many prominent researchers and

theoreticians over the past 30 to 40 years, and it is once again achieving recognition because of its compatibility with whole language philosophy. This approach features integration of the language arts by having children dictate sentences based on their experiences and then read the sentences back. R. Van Allen (1973, p. 158) states the rationale as follows:

> What I can think about, I can talk about.
>
> What I can say, I can write--or someone can write for me.
>
> What I write, I can read.
>
> I can read what I write, and what other people can write for me to read.

Frank Smith (1975) supports this approach in that he believes that it is more important for beginning readers to get meaning from the printed page than to learn decoding skills, and Hall (1984) agrees that the communication of meaning should be the major focus in learning to read. Cramer (1971, p. 33) agrees that reading should be meaningful and adds:

> A child is more likely to learn to read when the activities associated with the approach have functional relationships with his language, experiences, needs, and desires.

In a review of research, Nielsen (1989) claims that LEA has proved to be extremely effective for promoting reading development in linguistically different students.

In terms of beginning readers, Pikulski (1984) points out the effectiveness of the LEA in promoting oral language development, concept maturity, a positive attitude toward reading, and knowledge of language terms. All children have opportunities to

discuss their experiences, thus developing oral language skills, vocabulary, and concepts. There is no failure and there is no ability grouping, so at-risk students do not develop negative self-concepts toward reading. Downing (1976) has offered evidence that beginning readers are likely to be confused about terms like "word," "letter," and "sentence," but the LEA introduces these terms in context so that understanding develops naturally.

Much of the research on LEA has been of the method-comparison type, and the conclusion is that the overall reading achievement of students instructed with LEA is equal to or superior to the achievement of students who learned to read by other methods (Hall, 1977). In two experimental programs at the first grade level, Pienaar (1977) and Allen and Laminack (1982) observed that the LEA groups outperformed the control groups. Comparing strategies used by beginning readers during basal reading and while reading an LEA dictated story, Thomas (1980) found that the LEA children were reading more complex stories but were able to process them more proficiently. Kelly (1977) noted that a group of third graders using LEA outperformed a basal group in kowledge of basic sight vocabulary, and Aspulund (1976) found similar results with second grade students.

Since improved attitude toward reading is a claim often made for LEA, some research has been conducted to investigate affective factors. Ramsey (1985) found a significant increase in willingness to participate in reading-related activities and in student interest toward reading, and Fishman (1977) found that both first graders and their teachers had more positive attitudes

when using the LEA than when using basal readers. Stauffer (1973) reported that although LEA and basal groups showed no attitudinal differences, the LEA group chose to read more books.

Other benefits attributed to LEA include improved writing and spelling skills. From a summary of studies reviewed by Hall (1977), it appears that students instructed with LEA write longer stories, use more varied vocabulary, and spell and punctuate more accurately and more often than other students. Recent whole language findings support the idea that when reading and writing are combined, children become more proficient in both areas (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1983; and Hansen, Newkirk, and Graves, 1985). Spelling accuracy of LEA students also appears to be superior to that of non-LEA students due to the many opportunities to write (Cramer, 1970; Stauffer, 1973; and Stauffer, 1966).

Despite the many positive features of LEA, it is not a panacea for helping culturally different children learn to read (Lamb, 1984). There still remains some doubt about its effectiveness and its usefulness for classroom teachers. There is very little research about the LEA as it relates to comprehension (Nielsen, 1989), and a study by Lamb (1984) comparing LEA students and basal reader students revealed no significant differences between the groups on achievement test scores. Teachers also may find the LEA more difficult to understand and use than basal readers.

PURPOSE AND PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

It has been observed that in a rural community in Tennessee, students in fifth grade begin to fail the language and reading portions of standardized tests and never pass them again. School and university personnel hypothesized that an intervention program that would develop their language facility when they begin school might increase these students' likelihood of passing the tests. The traditional basal reader program used for reading instruction did not relate directly to the students' language patterns and experiences. The researcher sought AEL funding to provide reading and language instruction with the language experience approach (LEA), in addition to instruction with the basal reader. By basing instruction on children's prior knowledge and personal use of language, it was believed that instructors could help children acquire a stronger foundation in language.

This study was in effect for one and a half years (from January, 1989, to May, 1989 and from September, 1989, to May, 1990) at Uffelman Elementary School in Monterey, Tennessee. A university faculty member from Tennessee Technological University supervised the project, and a total of six research assistants in reading provided the instruction. On most occasions, two instructors worked with each experimental group.

Each year the project began with a meeting of the teachers whose students were involved, the principal of the school, the university faculty member, and the research assistants. Plans were made for scheduling activities for two groups of children from each of two grades for 30-45 minutes per week. The location

for the lessons varied somewhat because of conflicts with other activities and space was often cramped, but a place was found for each lesson. Schedules were maintained as planned initially, but were sometimes interrupted by holidays, snow days, class parties, or illnesses.

Lessons consisted of introductory experiences, discussions, chart writing from student dictation, chart reading, and follow-up activities. Art was often integrated with the language lessons, and children's work was displayed on hall bulletin boards. Reading award winning children's literature to each group was also part of each lesson. Instructors provided enrichment through songs, music, and art. Each session was planned to include as many language activities as possible.

Children were given cards for writing new words and practicing them. These cards were placed in zip-lock bags which served as word banks.

Each year the children participated in two major projects: (1) the science fair and (2) bookmaking, with a trip to the book fair held at Tennessee Tech. The research assistants involved the students in science projects which were entered in the annual regional Tennessee Tech science fair, and the second year the project won second place in its division. This winning project was a model of a volcano with student dictated charts about volcanoes and the events in the experiment. The bookmaking project enabled each child to write and illustrate a story and "publish" it as a book. The books were later displayed at the annual Tennessee Tech book fair, which the children attended.

Both of these special events were intended not only to develop language skills, but also to build self esteem.

The research assistants and faculty member attempted to establish close communication with classroom teachers so that the LEA would carry over into daily classroom activities. Teachers received lesson plans for each lesson, and children were picked up from classes and returned to them by the research students, who visited briefly about the children and the lessons. Research assistants consulted teachers about proposed lessons and special projects, and they gave them letters that told of progress and that expressed appreciation.

Near the beginning of the project, the faculty member met with high school students who were members of Future Teachers of America. The high school is located near the elementary school, and it was hoped that high school students would assist with the program. These students were trained in the use of the langauge experience approach and told the purpose of the study. However, partly because of scheduling problems, few high school students actually participated in the project.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The research design for this project included pre-assessment and post-assessment of students' (1) knowledge of sight words as determined by the number of words recognized on the Dolch Sight Word List and (2) awareness of sequence determined by the ability to arrange pictures from a story in story sequence. The treatment was based on the use of the language experience approach with the low reading groups in selected primary

classrooms. Of the 24 children so identified each year, one control group and two experimental groups with eight children each were established.

Testing was conducted in an informal, naturalistic setting by the faculty member and graduate assistants. Inasmuch as possible, stories were similar in familiarity and difficulty from pre to post assessment, and the first three levels of the Dolch words were used on both occasions. Children were assessed individually, and scores of the number of known Dolch words and the number of correctly sequenced pictures were recorded. Testing took two weeks at the beginning and two weeks at the end of each phase.

Although it was the original intent of the study to involve the same children over a year and a half period, the half year and the yearlong studies were analyzed separately. This was due partly to having different research assistants for each phase and partly to the difference in student members between the two phases. During the first phase, the grade levels were kindergarten and first grade, whereas during the second phase they were grades one and two. There was some overlap among the children from one year to the next.

FINDINGS

At the conclusion of the winter-spring, 1989, phase, T-tests were run to determine if there were any significant differences between control and experimental groups for either word recognition or knowledge of sequence at both kindergarten and first grade levels. No significant differences were found.

The yearlong study that ran from September, 1989, to May, 1990, showed the following results. A T-Test performed on the first grade test results showed that the experimental groups performed significantly better than the control group on both the post Dolch and post sequence tests. A T-Test performed on the second grade test results showed that the experimental groups performed significantly better than the control group on the post sequence test, but did not perform better on the post Dolch test.

Based on their observations, the research assistants found that children improved in their ability to dictate complete sentences and in their use of language. The children seemed to progresss faster with sequencing than with word recognition, perhaps because little time was provided for activities with word banks. Activities were geared for success, and each student achieved some measure of success.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This project was intended to coordinate efforts among high school students, classroom teachers, home language and experiences, and university faculty. Involvement by high school students was minimal during the first half year, and was not even attempted during the second full year. Despite efforts of research assistants to involve classroom teachers in the language experience approach, the teachers appeared to be too busy with regular classroom instruction to try to understand and use procedures recommended by the LEA instructors. Thus, there is likely to be little carryover after the program has concluded.

The placement of students within control and experimental

groups was intended to be random, but teachers placed the children whom they felt would benefit most from LEA in the experimental groups and put the more able students in the control groups. Thus, the experimental students consisted of the lower achieving students, which may have affected the statistical results.

Because of variation in group members, the study covered two short periods of time instead of one longer period of time. Also, the length of time allotted by the teachers for working with the groups of children was so short that instructors had little time to develop lessons fully. Although teachers were asked to encourage students to practice with their word bank cards during the week, few, if any, teachers did this. Therefore, most children received instruction for 30-45 minutes once a week without any reinforcement in the classroom. It is felt that this amount of time is too short for any significant growth in language.

Teachers varied in their responsiveness to the project, although all appeared to be eager to participate initially. They seemed pleased with the products (science fair entries, art projects, and bookmaking), but showed little interest in the process through which these projects were developed. One teacher refused on some occasions to allow her children to attend the LEA lessons until they had completed their seat work, which shortened the lesson time for these children considerably.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The premise of using language experience to bolster the

language skills and self esteem of low socioeconomic, rural children is basically sound. It is in keeping with the whole language philosophy that is now well accepted by many educators, and it values and builds upon the language and experiences of the students.

A major weakness of this particular project was the teachers' lack of commitment and involvement. In the future, teachers need to value the program enough to provide priority time for students to participate, cooperate in reinforcing the activities for these children in the classroom during the week, and learn how to use the LEA so that they can extend the learning in their classrooms and continue its use in future years.

Major strengths include the building of oral language and reading skills among these young children. As they watched their dictation being recorded and as they wrote and kept their word bank cards, they began to see purposes for reading and writing. By participating in book fair and science fair projects, they developed more positive self concepts because they realized that they were able to create something of value. The children looked forward to the weekly sessions and enjoyed the activities.

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